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# *From a Church in Philadelphia, Sports Reference Informs the World*

By **James Wagner**

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PHILADELPHIA — While writing a sermon in September, Cheryl Pyrch, the pastor of Summit Presbyterian Church, needed an assist. On the topic of greatness and Jesus Christ, she wanted to open with recollections of greats in other spheres.

She didn't have to look very far for a source.

Having encountered [Wilt Chamberlain](#) in passing almost 40 years ago, she decided he was the great she wanted to highlight. And details of his career — four Most Valuable Player Awards, seven N.B.A. scoring titles — were close at hand, literally and figuratively through Sports Reference, a monolith of sports data websites that just happens to rent space from the church.

“I didn’t know all this in 1980,” Pyrch told the congregation as she described Chamberlain’s awards during the Sunday service. “I got it yesterday from a Sports Reference website.”

The ubiquitous Sports Reference family of websites — [Baseball-Reference.com](#), [Basketball-Reference.com](#), [Pro-Football-Reference.com](#), [Hockey-Reference.com](#), and so on — are some of the most popular sports almanacs on the internet.

They draw users of all kinds, from people casually searching for a trivia answer to owners of professional teams. Aided by an overhaul of its mobile website, Sports Reference’s founder and president, Sean Forman, said the group of sites drew one billion page views last year, a record for the company.

When Forman decided to expand Sports Reference's operation, he took over space that had opened up at his church in Philadelphia. Mark Makela for The New York Times

Sports Reference, however, does not have the gleaming offices or huge staff of a digital titan. It has 11 full-time employees and is headquartered on the third floor of a building at Summit Presbyterian in Philadelphia, behind the 100-year-old main church and above the gymnasium, which is often used as a day care center.

"Walking through it to come in and out, sometimes you're going through 3-year-olds tossing balls," said Mike Kania, 38, who eight years ago became one of the company's first employees. "I worked for AOL for a long time where we had a badge to scan at the front door, people there and a front desk. It's a lot different from that."

It is, in fact, a point of pride among Sports Reference employees that the sites have grown from humble beginnings into oft-used resources. Until late last year, Forman, 47, was cleaning the office and taking out the trash. (He has since hired the church's janitor to take over those duties.)

They are among the most popular sports-related sites. Basketball-Reference trails only NBA.com, while Pro-Football-Reference is second to NFL.com, according to [SimilarWeb](#). Nearly two decades after Forman created Baseball-Reference, it ranks third among baseball sites, behind MLB.com and [MLBTradeRumors.com](#). (Baseball-Reference, however, is the top draw in Forman's stable.)

The sites are not just for casual fans. J.J. Redick, the Philadelphia 76ers guard, pays for an advertising-free Basketball-Reference subscription. John Henry, the principal owner of the Boston Red Sox and Liverpool F.C., uses Baseball-Reference's Play Index to manage statistical searches. Scott Boras, the well-known baseball agent, donated \$100 to the company during its infancy because he had relied on the site's data while negotiating a contract for Andruw Jones, Forman said.

"I use it daily," said Thad Levine, the Minnesota Twins general manager, although his team, like many others, generates its own advanced and proprietary data.

While Sports Reference's sites are mostly automated, Mike Lynch, left, Forman and nine others work to keep them constantly updating and improving. Mark Makela for The New York Times

"We went so far as to hire one of their back-end programmers," added Levine, referring to Hans Van Slooten, who oversaw Baseball-Reference until June, when the Twins hired him for their front office.

The sites are still expanding and developing. Forman said he envisioned Basketball-Reference eventually surpassing Baseball-Reference in traffic as a result of the data revolution in the N.B.A. And over the summer, Sports Reference began another major undertaking: a soccer website, FBref.com, which the company hopes will be as comprehensive as its other sites. In a twist from its

current offerings, the company is planning to make the soccer site bilingual, with English and Spanish versions.

The sites are painstakingly tweaked for updates and corrections. Some errors are reported through the dozens of emails the company receives daily. One came from the mother of Casey Fossum, a former major league pitcher. She wrote to say that her son's birth date was wrong. It was corrected.

Other requests reveal the reach of Sports Reference.

A pitching coach sent an email asking that his Italian league statistics be added to his page so that his players would stop teasing him about being a bad pitcher. A woman wrote in to say that she was dating a person who claimed to be a former N.F.L. player but that she could not find him on Pro-Football-Reference. She wanted to know if that was because of an oversight or a lie.

"I tried to let her down as gently as possible," said Mike Lynch, 37, whose official title with the company is managing stathead. "I said something like, 'If he was cut in training camp, we wouldn't necessarily have a record of him playing in a regular season game.'"

Sports Reference started with Baseball-Reference in 2000, when Forman, looking to avoid work on his doctoral dissertation on applied mathematical and computational sciences at the University of Iowa, began building a website from the CD-ROM that accompanied the printed Total Baseball encyclopedias. He hoped to make historical data more accessible.

The information on Sports Reference sites comes from a variety of sources, including old guides the company has worked to acquire over the years. Mark Makela for The New York Times

Forman, who has contributed to [The New York Times's baseball coverage](#) in the past, expanded his endeavor by creating Sports Reference in 2004. Three years later he formalized loose affiliations with Pro-Football-Reference (founded by Doug Drinen in 2000) and Basketball-Reference (founded by Justin Kubatko in 2004). Kubatko left Sports Reference in 2013 because of what he called "[creative differences](#)."

In 2007, Forman still fit the stats nerd stereotype, working out of the basement of his home and staying up until 1 a.m. updating or improving the website. The year before, he had left his full-time job of six years — professor of mathematics and computer science at St. Joseph's University — because it was too hard to juggle both. He also needed a better place to work.

So Forman turned to his church, which had space to rent.

Sports Reference's seven websites are usually updated automatically, mostly from official feeds of statistics that the company pays for. Some data, such as roster transactions or salary information, is input manually, and there are always bugs to fix.

Once you get beyond the basics, however, the information on the sites runs the gamut of sources.

They include a collection of old college media guides acquired from a single collector and a professor in Britain who supplies statistics of independent baseball leagues. The sites also add some things just for fun, such as [Oddibe McDowell's page](#) listing his utility bills from 2011 and part of 2012, in reference to a series of articles [by Deadspin](#).

Sports Reference's goal is to become more comprehensive, even as sports leagues increasingly privatize their data. Eventually, the company hopes to charge for advanced features and to become less dependent on advertising,

which currently generates 95 percent of the sites' revenue. As of now, the only advanced tool that requires a paid subscription is Baseball-Reference's Play Index. (Don't worry: [The page for the former Met Keith Hernandez's mustache will live forever.](#))

That the little company in her church has become so important, with leading sports websites, earned a laugh from Pyrch. She had been to the sites once or twice, including the time she did sermon research.

"I think that both myself and most of the congregation would not realize what kind of a powerhouse Sports Reference is," she said. "I don't really know a lot about numbers or computers, but one billion is a lot."

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